

NOTES ON STYLE

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The essence of good writing is communication: communication of what you want to say, *no more, no less*. As one expert, William Zinsser, puts it, "the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest component. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what"—these are what weaken sentences, and erode clarity.

But clarity is elusive. These notes suggest measures that you, the student, can take to write more clearly.

General

- 1) **A good paper is unified:** united in tone, tense, voice, and purpose. Few things are more disconcerting than to have the writer switching from a matter-of-fact presentation of his subject to a passionate argument about the topic. Likewise, avoid changing between the past, past perfect and present tenses; *stay consistent*. Similarly, try to maintain the same voice in your writing. If you are writing in the first person, "I," do not switch to the second person, addressing "you," the reader. Last, integrate the components of your paper with its overall purpose: if you start off by saying you are going to make an argument on X, do not spend sixty percent of your space—or more—on Y.
- 2) **Take special care with your opening statement.** It should be *unambiguous* about the question your essay seeks to answer, what your general conclusions are, and how your argument is going to proceed. Your introduction sets the tone of the paper.
- 3) **Get to the point.** A paper on the Iraq war of 2003-2011, for instance, has no business reviewing the history of Iraq or the causes of the attacks of September 11, 2001, even though students will often spend much of their papers on background or secondary concerns. Such background material is usually common knowledge, and you are not likely to add fresh insights on this history in your brief treatment. The fact that it may be necessary for *you* to know certain material does not justify its inclusion in a short paper. Just write on as sophisticated level as you can comfortably sustain. Count on putting down on paper only a fraction of what you know about your topic.
- 4) **Put statements in positive, assertive form, and avoid noncommittal, hesitant language.** Your detailed documentation of an event or image speaks

much better than a lesser description adorned by adjectives such as "brutal" or "beautiful." If you let the facts speak for themselves then lurid adjectives and moralistic editorializing will be unnecessary. Use adjectives and other modifiers sparingly, if at all. Trust your material. Cut out the clutter that turns a "slum" into a "depressed socio-economic region," "now" into "this juncture in time," and "many" into "numerous."

5) **Correct spelling and grammar through proofreading** and the use of dictionaries. *Careful proofreading* of your final paper is essential. Nothing is more distracting to the reader than repeated spelling and typographical errors, or careless mistakes. Respect the reader, the subject, and yourself by checking over what you turn in.

6) **Writing is a exercise in discrimination.** This sounds bad, but it actually makes perfect sense. You have to *discriminate* among the many choices of data, interpretation, secondary sources, and nuances. The most important single criterion in evaluating a paper is neither content nor elegance of expression, but the your ability to discern: can you find a meaningful path through complexities and ambiguities of your subject? Are you critical?

7) Scholarly writing, some argue, is counter-creative. This is incorrect. **A good style is unobtrusive as a vehicle for communicating ideas, often very precise ideas.** These ideas should be the cutting edge in a paper, not the language in which they are couched. But good ideas do not gain currency if they are poorly expounded. *Ideas need concise, precise expression, and novel or radical idea may well call for vivid, imaginative expression.* Style does not come through magic or flash, but through the long hours spent in composing. Learn to write by writing.

8) **Write for yourself.** This is not to say that you have license to bore the reader or to suggest that it does not matter how you express your thoughts—these are matters of craft for you to master—but it is to say that you need not worry about the "audience." Writing for yourself is an attitude of being *confident of your material* and being willing to work to convey its ideas as precisely as possible. Concern yourself not with who your potential, skeptical reader may be, but with your topic and how well you communicate your ideas as cleraly as you can.

9) **The word processor does not make writing easier.** The word processor—probably an unquestioned part of your student environment—makes writing faster, but in no way eliminates rewriting. If anything, the opposite. The convenience of word processors for putting down thoughts allows writers to be sloppier in their initial formulations *and makes rewriting all the more imperative.*

10) **It is not plagiarism or dishonesty to have friends or acquaintances read your work,** respond to your ideas, and criticize your writing. In fact, as long as they do not do the actual writing, the more feedback you get, the better off you

are. You are encouraged to use the Learning Skills Center on the third floor of Jester Hall. The LSC staff knows of this class. They are there to help you learn.

Grammar, Usage

- 11) **Be sure to match subject and verb in number** (singular versus plural) and tense (past, present, future, etc.). The number of the subject determines the verb.
- 12) **Avoid using nouns as adjectives.** ("The *United States peace mission position* on Vietnam was. . ." Better: "The *position of the American peace mission* on Vietnam was. . .").
- 13) **Avoid putting two adverbs together ending in "ly"** (The Congress was *inevitably totally* unready to assume responsibility). If possible, eliminate adverbs altogether.
- 14) **Use the first person sparingly**, only as "metadiscourse"—saying how it is that you will argue. Otherwise, *it is obvious that the views expressed are your own*. Attention to the fact of your authorship—"in my opinion," or, "I believe"—adds nothing and could weaken an argument by particularizing it.
- 15) **Contractions "can't," "don't"—should be used sparingly in formal writing, if at all.** The same goes for slang.
- 16) **Join independent clauses by a semicolon; join dependent clauses by a comma.** An exception is when the independent clauses are brief and parallel in form. Use the dash—something I like to use for asides and tangential remarks. Also use them for dependent clauses contained within complex sentences—a "nesting" of one clause within another. Use the colon for introducing a list of particulars, an amplification, or an illustrative quotation.

Composition

- 17) **Place familiar words and ideas at the beginning of sentences and paragraphs.** Referring at the outset of a new sentence to those ideas that you have already mentioned, discussed, or implied carry your reader along to the new ideas, significant findings, and emphases that you put at the end of sentences. *Build the new upon the old.* Put the strange in terms of the familiar.
- 18) **Let verbs and nouns do the work.** These are your building blocks. Make characters the subjects of your sentences, their actions your verbs.
Compare "The *closure* of the branch and the *transfer* of its business and non-unionized employees *constituted* an unfair labor practice because the purpose

of *obtaining* an economic benefit by means of *discouraging* unionization motivated the *closure* and *transfer*" with "The Partners *committed* an unfair labor practice when they *closed* the branch and *transferred* its business and nonunionized employees in order to *discourage* unionization and thereby *obtain* an economic benefit.

19) **Avoid useless changes of verbs into nouns and the passive voice.**

Do not say "The police *conducted an investigation* into the matter," but "The police *investigated* the matter."

Do not say "*There is a need* for further study of this program, but "*The engineering staff must* study this program further."

Do not say "The *intention* of the IRS *is* to audit the records of the business," but "The IRS *intends* to audit the records of the business."

Writing Center: You are strongly encouraged to use the Undergraduate Writing Center, FAC 211, 471-6222: <http://www.uwc.utexas.edu/>). The Undergraduate Writing Center offers free, individualized, expert help with writing for any UT undergraduate, by appointment or on a drop-in basis. Any undergraduate enrolled in a course at UT can visit the UWC for assistance with any writing project. The consultants there work with students from every department on campus, for both academic and non-academic writing. Whether you are writing a lab report, a resume, a term paper, a statement for an application, or your own poetry, UWC consultants will be happy to work with you. Their services are not just for writing that has "problems." Getting feedback from an informed audience is a normal part of a successful writing project. Consultants help students develop strategies to improve their writing. The assistance they provide is intended to foster independence. Each student determines how to use the consultant's advice. The consultants are trained to help you work on your writing in ways that preserve the integrity of your work.

For additional information and for elaboration on these points, you might wish to consult the following:

Strunk, William Jr. and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. Third Edition. New York: Macmillan, 1979.

Williams, Joseph. *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. Fourth Edition. New York: Harper Perennial, 1990.